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POWER CONTROL CIRCUIT FOR LASER DIODE HAVING WAVELENGTH COMPENSATION

BACKGROUND

Wavelength division multiplexed systems, in which multiple channels are
5 carried at different wavelengths on the same optical fiber, require adjustable output
power to address problems such as optical crosstalk between channels and power
balancing of optical signals for optical amplifiers. It is common today to control the
output power of a semiconductor laser diode to maintain a constant operational output
level, for example, 0 dBm. The constant output power laser diode is used in
10 combination with an optical attenuator to provide the adjustable output power that is
needed. The type of optical attenuator can be either fixed or variable attenuation. The
fixed attenuation type is neither field adjustable nor remotely controllable. The variable
attenuation type is large and expensive and can require additional power sensing
circuitry.

15 SUMMARY

There is a need for an approach to controlling the output power of laser diodes
that is less costly and less bulky than those that require external optical attenuators.
There is also a need for a power control mechanism that takes into account the
relationship between temperature and wavelength in the operation of laser diodes.

An apparatus and method of the present approach provides for electrical control of the laser output power without the need for a costly and bulky optical attenuator. The present approach further provides wavelength control to compensate for the relationship between laser diode operating temperature and wavelength.

5 Accordingly, a control circuit for a laser diode includes a power controller and a wavelength controller. The power controller adjusts a bias current to the laser diode to change the power output of the laser diode. The power change can have a corresponding wavelength shift effect on the nominal operating wavelength of the laser diode. The wavelength controller compensates for the wavelength shift such that the
10 laser diode maintains operation at the nominal wavelength.

In an embodiment, the power controller includes a bias current source that provides an adjustable bias current to the laser diode. A power monitor loop includes a backface diode for monitoring the laser diode power output to provide a power monitor signal. A power control signal added to the power monitor signal provides a power
15 adjust signal. The bias current source adjusts the bias current responsive to a difference between a power reference voltage input of the bias current source and the power adjust signal.

In an embodiment, the wavelength controller includes a temperature control circuit that provides a control current to a thermoelectric element for controlling the
20 temperature operation point of the laser diode. A temperature monitor loop includes a temperature sensor for monitoring the temperature operation point to provide a temperature monitor signal. A wavelength compensation signal added to the temperature monitor signal provides a wavelength control signal. The temperature control circuit adjusts the control current to the thermoelectric element responsive to a
25 difference between a temperature reference signal and the wavelength control signal.

Preferably, the wavelength compensation signal is proportional to the power control signal.

In an alternate embodiment, the wavelength controller includes an etalon element for wavelength compensation.

5 BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The foregoing and other objects, features and advantages of the invention will be apparent from the following more particular description of preferred embodiments of the invention, as illustrated in the accompanying drawings in which like reference characters refer to the same parts throughout the different views. The drawings are not
10 necessarily to scale, emphasis instead being placed upon illustrating the principles of the invention.

FIG. 1 is a circuit diagram of a laser transmitter of the prior art.

FIG. 2 is a chart that illustrates power control characteristics of the transmitter of FIG. 1.

15 FIG. 3 is a chart that illustrates temperature control characteristics of the transmitter of FIG. 1.

FIG. 4 is a circuit diagram of a first embodiment of a laser transmitter in accordance with the present system.

FIG. 5 is a chart illustrating power and wavelength control characteristics of the
20 transmitter of FIG. 4.

FIG. 6 is a circuit diagram of a second embodiment of a laser transmitter in accordance with the present system.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

A typical laser transmitter 10 of the prior art is shown in FIG. 1. The laser transmitter includes a laser module 18 coupled to a variable optical attenuator (VOA) 30 via an optical fiber 32. The laser module includes a laser diode 20, a backface diode 22 and a modulator 24. The laser diode 20 typically provides a continuous wave output at a constant bias level corresponding to a constant power level. A data stream input 11 is coupled through gate 16 to modulator 24 to modulate the continuous wave output of the laser diode 20. For simplicity the modulator 24 is shown as a diode, though it is understood that it is commonly a Mach-Zhender interferometer or lithium niobate waveguide device. The modulated optical signal is coupled to the optical fiber 32.

The constant power output of the laser diode 20 is controlled using a bias current source and a power monitor loop. The bias current source, which includes operational amplifier 12 and transistor 14, provides an adjustable bias current I_{DFB} to the laser diode. The power monitor loop includes backface diode 22 for monitoring the laser diode power output to provide a power monitor signal that is coupled to the negative input of op amp 12. The output of op amp 12 is coupled to the negative input through capacitor C1. The positive input of op amp 12 has a power reference voltage V_{REF} . The op amp 12 adjusts the bias current I_{DFB} responsive to a difference between the power reference V_{REF} and the power monitor signal. For example, if the power monitor signal is less than the power reference V_{REF} , op amp 12 provides more bias current.

To control the operating temperature of the laser transmitter, the laser module 18 includes a thermistor 26 and a thermal electric cooler (TEC) element 28. Operational amplifier 34 and transimpedance bridge 36 provide a control current I_{TEC} to the TEC element 28. A temperature monitor loop includes thermistor 26 for monitoring the temperature operation point to provide a temperature monitor signal that is coupled to the negative input of op amp 34. The output of op amp 34 is coupled to the negative input through capacitor C2. The positive input of op amp 34 has a temperature

reference voltage V_{TEMP} . The op amp 34 adjusts the control current I_{TEC} to the TEC element 28 responsive to a difference between the temperature reference V_{TEMP} and the temperature monitor signal. For example, if the temperature monitor signal is less than V_{TEMP} , the op amp 34 provides more current to the TEC element.

- 5 Direct electrical control of the power output of a laser diode generally is understood to be problematic, given the relationship between operating temperature and wavelength in such devices. In particular, the relationship depends on output power and the characteristics of individual devices.

Referring to FIG. 2, the chart illustrates the effect on operating wavelength when
10 the laser output power is adjusted for the exemplary laser transmitter 10 of FIG. 1. In particular, by applying a voltage V_{POWER} through a resistor to negative input 40 of op amp 12, the laser output power is adjusted. Note that the temperature control portion of the laser transmitter is kept constant, i.e., V_{TEMP} is constant. The slope of the power adjustment curve (right vertical axis) is negative. That is, an increase in voltage V_{POWER}
15 results in a decrease in laser output power. A corresponding change $\Delta\lambda$ in operating wavelength occurs (left vertical axis) such that a decrease in laser power output results in a shorter operating wavelength.

As shown, a power change from 3.0 mW to below 1.0 mW results in a wavelength shift of about 2000 picometers. In modern dense wavelength division
20 multiplex (DWDM) systems designed for 100 GHz or tighter channel spacings, the channels are only +/-100 picometers wide around a nominal specified center wavelength. Thus, the change in wavelength operation that occurs with the power adjustment shown in FIG. 2 is too large and is unacceptable for modern telecommunication systems.

FIG. 3 is a chart that illustrates the effect on operating wavelength when the temperature reference voltage V_{TEMP} is adjusted for the laser transmitter 10 of FIG. 1 while the output power of the laser transmitter and V_{REF} are kept constant. The slope of the curve in FIG. 3 is negative. That is, an increase in temperature reference voltage

5 V_{TEMP} causes the TEC element to operate at a cooler temperature which results in a shorter operating wavelength for the laser diode. As shown, a change in V_{TEMP} from 2 to 3 volts results in a wavelength shift of about 2000 picometers.

It has been found in the present approach that, by taking into account the wavelength shift due to power adjustment and due to temperature, a power control

10 circuit can be implemented that provides variable laser power output while maintaining operation of the laser diode at a nominal wavelength within an acceptable range.

In an embodiment of a laser control circuit 100 in accordance with the present approach shown in FIG. 4, a power control signal V_{MOD} is provided that is added to the power monitor signal through resistor network R1 and R2 at the negative input of op

15 amp 12 so that the operational power level can be increased or decreased over the nominal set point provided by reference voltage V_{REF} . In addition, to compensate for the wavelength shift of the laser diode 22, a scaled version 29 of the power control signal V_{MOD} is provided that is added to the temperature monitor signal 27 through resistor R4 at the negative input of op amp 34. Note that the control circuit 100 eliminates the need

20 for a VOA (FIG. 1). Thus, a simple but elegant solution is provided to solve the problems noted above.

Different laser diode devices can exhibit different temperature and wavelength characteristics. Thus, in the control circuit 100 of FIG. 4, the values for resistors R1, R2, R3 and R4 can be accordingly adjusted to fit the characteristics of each laser diode.

As described, the control circuit 100 provides an adjustable output power. FIG. 5 shows the laser output power (right vertical axis) as it varies with the applied adjustment voltage, V_{MOD} . Note that for V_{MOD} of 0V the output power is approximately 2.5 mW. With V_{MOD} of 3V the output power is approximately 1.5 mW. Thus, linear adjustment of output power is provided.

FIG. 5 also shows a residual amount of wavelength variation (left vertical axis) for the control circuit of FIG. 4. Note that for V_{MOD} of 0 V the difference between the intended wavelength and the actual wavelength, given as $\Delta\lambda$, is about 25 picometers. The negative sign indicates that the wavelength is less than the intended wavelength. For V_{MOD} of 4.5 V the difference $\Delta\lambda$ is about 0.

As noted above, DWDM system today require tight channel spacings. Without the wavelength control feature provided as shown in FIG. 4, the variation of the laser wavelength as the power is adjusted from 2.5 mW to 0 mW (FIG. 5) will be very much larger than the acceptable variation. With the control circuit of FIG. 4, the residual wavelength variation is well within the acceptable variation.

Referring to FIG. 6, a second embodiment of a control circuit 200 is shown. In this embodiment, a Fabry-Perot etalon locker device 42 is used to provide the wavelength compensation. The etalon locker 42 receives light emitted from laser diode 20, and based upon the wavelength of the light received, outputs a signal to add to the negative input of op amp 34 for controlling the wavelength.

While this invention has been particularly shown and described with references to preferred embodiments thereof, it will be understood by those skilled in the art that various changes in form and details may be made therein without departing from the scope of the invention encompassed by the appended claims.